

Downtown Walk Around Summary

Observations and Recommendations from
the Iowa Downtown Resource Center

October 16, 2025

Jim Engle, Director, Iowa Downtown Resource

Center

Keegan Hall, Design Specialist, Iowa Resource

Center

Presented December 2, 2025



Overview:

- General Strengths
- Downtown Signage
- Historic Buildings
- Streetscape and Walkability
- Business Relationships
- Programs and Resources



Downtown Strengths

- Buildings generally in good condition
- Strong core businesses
- 3-screen movie theater
- Upper story residential living
- Significant renovation in progress



Downtown Signage



Downtown Signage

- Look through the eyes of a visitor. Focus on wayfinding signs to help visitors. Integrate community branding in signs.
- More emphasis on pedestrian experience
 - Increase use of blade signs
- Add each business's street number to the front of their location
- Each business should post their hours of operation clearly near the entrance. (vinyl graphics)
- Take down obsolete signs
- Develop a program or encourage businesses to develop "Open" flags or sandwich boards indicating stores are open for business
- Take one year to focus on the storefront grant program



Historic Buildings



Historic Buildings

- Create a building and business inventory (including upper stories) so that you know the status of every building downtown
- Vibrant downtowns almost always have interesting upper story residential units
- HC Lane Building
- Use the Iowa Downtown Resource Center's Downtown Design Guide to help guide building improvements
- Incentive workshop for building owners and city officials
 - Work with the Iowa Resource Center on planning this event
 - IEDA's Catalyst Grant for individual building rehab
 - Downtown Revitalization Grant (DTR) for multiple façade improvements and refining of local incentives
 - Make sure design standards, eligibility, and financial incentives work together to promote investment



Streetscape and Walkability



Streetscape & Walkability

- Develop a long-range plan for interesting amenities that can be completed over time.
 - Benches
 - Trash receptacles
 - Planters
 - Banners
 - Murals and other public art pieces
- Add mounting brackets to the downtown street lamps. Consider reducing the pole height for improved pedestrian scale lighting
- Parking
 - Better signage to identify public parking areas
 - Create a comprehensive map of public parking spaces
 - Parking lot behind the Ben Franklin store is confusing and needs a overhaul.



Streetscape & Walkability

- Pocket Park
 - Figureoutbicycle issue
 - Smaller tables
 - Brainstorm events that could take place there



Business Relationships



Business Relationships

- Work on retail camaraderie among retail businesses
- Come up with one new downtown retail event which rings the retail cash registers
- Be intentional on business succession
 - Work with the SBDC
 - University of Northern Iowa
- Vacancies
 - Focus groups to come up with a wish list of needed businesses
 - Work with property owners on rental incentives
 - Do pop up stores in vacant buildings during the holiday season
 - Creative signs: “This space would make a great bookstore”
 - Restaurants are downtown drivers - prioritize this in recruitment



Programs & Resources



Programs & Resources

- Research the BOOST and Housing Readiness Assessment programs offered through EMPOWER RURAL IOWA. Consider applying for a planning grant to update or create a Comprehensive Plan
- IOWA LIVING ROADWAYS – program to help communities enhance their gateways and community assets, especially along major roadways
- IOWA RURAL COUNCIL – networking and assisting rural communities in Iowa. Weekly email blasts and educational opportunities
- CERTIFIED LOCAL GOVERNMENT PROGRAM – supports preservation needs. Active participation makes your community eligible for funding, training, technical assistance and provides access to a supportive network of other preservation-minded communities
- MAIN STREET IOWA PROGRAM
iowaeda.com/downtown-resources-center/networking/ - examples of promotional activities, fundraising, market analysis, downtown housing, public spaces, etc



Encourage Others To Do A “Walk Around” Visit:

- Business Owners
- Citizens
- Students



SCDC- Economic Development Strategies:

- Assess the current eligibility guidelines of Storefront Loan Program and the Retail Interior Renovation Program
 - Long-term strategy-achieving what we want?
 - Possible partnering with pedestrian walkability initiative (ie. blade signs)
- Assist with a market analysis of a value-added business that should be recruited
- Work with stakeholders in assessing Main Street Iowa Program
 - Attend an application workshop
- Act as an “Air Traffic Controller” for grant sources
 - Monitor grant availability
 - Hosting continuing education seminars and networking events for grant opportunities
 - Catalyst Grant-\$100,000 for reinvestment into business owners' property



SCDC-

Chamber Initiatives:

- Support downtown marketing initiatives
- Spearhead one new downtown event that can ring cash registers
- Environmental scan of what is working for other downtown communities
- Increased SCDC presence



Thank you!

Tania Gonzales – Executive Director

Trista Kavanagh – Chamber Director

Mark Brown and Shanelle Matus - Interims

712-324-2813

[ta ni_a@ c it yo fsh el_d on .c om](mailto:tania@cityofsheldon.com)

tkavanagh@cityofsheldon.com



DOWNTOWN WALK AROUND SUMMARY

SHELDON, IOWA

KEESHA HALL, DOWNTOWN DESIGN SPECIALIST
IOWA DOWNTOWN RESOURCE CENTER

JIM ENGLE, DIRECTOR, IOWA DOWNTOWN RESOURCE CENTER
IOWA DOWNTOWN RESOURCE CENTER

This report is a summary of the observations and recommendations from an Iowa Downtown Resource Center Walk Around conducted in Sheldon, Iowa on October 18, 2025.

Sheldon, Iowa (5,500 pop) in Iowa's northwest corner is O'Brien County's most populous city. This vibrant community has a rich railroad history and a strong agricultural focus. Sheldon is the home of Northwest Iowa Community College and has a good industrial base. The Sheldon Chamber & Development Corporation is currently planning a residential development expansion featuring 150 new lots. Sheldon celebrates with Celebration Days each Labor Day weekend, RiseFest in June, and Christmas activities. Local heritage is promoted and preserved with seasonal events and festivals in the Prairie Arts Historical Park. Downtown Sheldon is one of the commercial hubs in the area. It features retail shops, eateries, coffee, and professional services. Downtown Sheldon is home to Iowa's last Ben Franklin store, a local favorite, and a three-screen movie theater. Downtown is blessed with historic buildings including the historic Carnegie Library which now houses the Sheldon Historical Museum. A recent sidewalk project with bump outs and street lighting help create easy accessibility for pedestrians.



DOWNTOWN SIGNAGE

Creative and quality business signage is one of the most powerful tools to add color and vitality to business owners' storefronts and to make a district wide impact. The first observation this walk around team had when entering Sheldon's downtown district was the opportunity Sheldon has to make the downtown stand out as a district with creative signage. A combination of sign styles is a good thing. Downtown Sheldon has almost no blade signs (perpendicular to the road). This is highly unusual. Blade signs are important for pedestrians to see. Also, many businesses have signs that don't indicate what the business sells. A good business sign should clearly tell the story of the business.

- Take one year to focus the storefront grant program on quality business signage. Kick off the program with a handout or brief educational program that highlights good signage. The Iowa Downtown Resource Center has examples we can share. Make sure local sign ordinances allow for different signage types including blade signage and appropriate lighted signs. Get information about Valley Junction's Co-Sign Program that dramatically changed the look of their district. Window clings on display windows are a good way to let shoppers know what types of products and services they can find inside. Encourage creative signage that reflects individual business identity, avoid homogeneity and thematic signage.
- Add each business' street number to the front of their location. This helps visitors, as well as people making deliveries.
- Make sure each business posts their hours of operation clearly near their entrance. Vinyl window graphics are an easy and effective way to do this. Avoid Scotch tape for more polished signage.
- Take down obsolete signs from businesses that have closed. These signs remind people of businesses that are no longer there, contributing to a sense of disinvestment, and can impede new businesses occupying available spaces.
- Develop a program or encourage businesses to develop "Open" flags or sandwich boards indicating that stores are open for business. Avoid homogeneity with a program like this. Creative and different is better.
- Take a drive around your downtown and visit the entrances. Consider what a visitor sees. Look for opportunities for wayfinding signs to help visitors find the historic downtown, the Carnegie Museum, City Hall, and other community assets. Integrate community branding into directional and gateway signage.



Business hours and pedestrian-scale business signage would complement these nicely activated storefront windows.

HISTORIC BUILDINGS



Nothing defines a downtown more than the appearance of its downtown buildings. Downtown Sheldon has a nice stock of historic buildings with few disruptions in the density of the downtown blocks. Most of the buildings are in good shape and well cared for but there are several opportunities to improve their appearance and functionality. The renovation project currently underway on the H.C. Lane Building looks to be a great investment and has potential to inspire further building improvement projects downtown.

- Use the Iowa Downtown Resource Center's [Downtown Design Guide](#) to help guide building improvements. Several projects from the past have used inappropriate materials and made design choices that are incompatible with the historic context. Preserving the historical integrity of your buildings is important and you will need to help educate building owners on what types of improvements the city desires to see downtown. The guide is a set of recommendations that can easily be used to help and establish design standards for your local grant programs to incentivize quality building improvements.
- Let's do an incentives workshop for building owners and city officials. The Iowa Downtown Resource Center can work with the city on this event. This can include IEDA's Catalyst Grant (which has not been utilized in Sheldon) for individual building rehab

projects, the Downtown Revitalization Grant (DTR) for multiple façade improvements and refining of local incentives. This workshop could include a section on local ordinances to prevent maintenance issues, vacancies, and storefront housing.

- Create a building and business inventory so that you know the status of every building downtown. Knowing vacancies and your available space can help you steer potential new businesses in the right direction. Start with an inventory of upper stories.
- Vibrant downtowns almost always have interesting, upper story residential units. This creates an entire market of people who use the downtown services and frequent businesses. Upper floor occupancy can help cash flow building investments. Sheldon currently has about 50% occupancy on its second floors. Do a fun upper story tour of occupied and unoccupied space to showcase success stories and opportunities. Take a field trip to a community that has had success with this (for example, Spencer). Target one building for an upper story housing project, perhaps utilizing an incentive such as the Catalyst Grant to help get it done.
- Support property owners with project development and financial layering for building renovation projects. Focusing on renovating iconic and highly visible properties such as the "Sheldon Bank/Time After Time Building" can have transformative impact. Quality building renovation projects often require significant public and private investment. Revisit design standards, eligibility, and programmatic requirements to ensure local incentives are effectively supporting desired improvements and addressing financial gaps to achieve quality improvements.



Vacant upper floors and commercial spaces present opportunity for new housing and retail in the downtown. Imagine shuttered windows replaced with vibrant apartments, and multiple new businesses filling the vacated "Hallmark" storefronts.

STREETSCAPE & WALKABILITY

Communities that raise the bar with their pedestrian experience are always more equipped to establish downtown as a place to be. Providing a comfortable and engaging street experience is an important component to make downtown feel warm and inviting. Sheldon's downtown needs a streetscape spark. The sidewalks lack amenities especially in the cold months when planters come down. Can you create an unforgettable downtown experience?

- Develop a long-range plan for interesting amenities that can be completed over time with an emphasis on benches, trash receptacles, planters, banners, murals, and other public art pieces. Often times, these amenities can be done through partnerships with local artists, school programs, and even local companies.
- Add mounting brackets to the downtown streetlamps to accommodate banners and hanging baskets. Contact the pole manufacturer for suitable mounting options for your specific pole type. Long term, consider reducing the pole height for improved pedestrian scale lighting.
- Ample public parking is available downtown, but as is the case in many places, there is a perceived lack of options. Make a concerted effort to have every public parking lot identified with attractive and unified signage. Call it "Free Parking." Providing signage for both visitors and community members is important, especially for destination businesses like the theater. This signage project must start with an inventory of all parking spaces. Parking maps is also an option. And, when you do inventory parking spaces, make suggestions for adding a few parking spaces.
- The parking lot behind the Ben Franklin store is a bit confusing and needs a design overhaul.
- The pocket park with the arch was a good way to sign/memorialize three important businesses from the past and also provide a space for people to gather. The design of the park may be limiting the number of people that actually use it. Make it unacceptable to put garbage or store bikes in this park (at least without cool bike racks). Consider smaller tables for more intimate groups and a small stage for entertainment. Is more greenspace an option? How about more plantings or an interactive amenity? Program the park with "Alive at 5" events in the summer with local talent. Use the CAPS group to develop ideas for making the pocket park more useable.



A mix of quality business signage, banners, and flowers bring vibrancy to this downtown streetscape.

Sheldon's downtown has a solid number of businesses, but recent vacancies have started to pop up. The downtown business community is much more effective if a downtown has a combination of individual business promotion and promotion of the business district as a destination. Businesses must work together to get that done. Strong districts almost always have a small core of excited business owners that lead the charge. The "walk around" team didn't get the sense that this is happening in downtown Sheldon. It won't happen overnight, but grooming a small group of business leaders is important.



- Sheldon does a nice job of community special events, but there are less retail promotions with the goal of ringing cash registers on the day of an event. The Ladies Night Out is a good event that can be done with perhaps limited participation. We would like to see one new retail event in 2026 to get local residents in the stores with hopefully good retail participation.
- Getting businesses together has been tough, but don't stop trying. Have a formal breakfast or meeting (perhaps quarterly) that is always held in a different retail store. Focus on that store and what they offer. From time to time devote an agenda to something specific that impacts businesses, for example store hours or parking. Little by little, establish camaraderie.
- Every downtown is faced with aging business owners. Take business succession seriously. Work with the SBDC or the University of Northern Iowa on a program to address business succession planning. Perhaps this is sponsored by SCDC.
- Since vacancy in the downtown is becoming a concern, commit to a plan to address it. Who will take the lead?
 - Use focus groups and a review of community voids to come up with a wish list of needed business types
 - Work with property owners on rental incentives to attract new businesses
 - Do pop up stores in vacant buildings especially during the holiday season
 - Design creative signs for windows.... "This space would make a great bookstore!"
 - Consider sectioning downtown storefronts into smaller spaces to make recruitment easier
 - Restaurants are downtown drivers. Sheldon has good restaurants but not many "downtown" choices. Make this a priority in recruitment efforts. Working with the property owner to attract a restaurant into the vacant "Durango's" restaurant space on 3rd Avenue will be the lowest hanging fruit.



PROGRAMS & RESOURCES

There are many partners and resources across the state that Sheldon should connect with to assist with their revitalization efforts. Many programs available help rural communities with a population under 20,000 leverage local funding to complete projects like planning, development and project implementation.

- Research the BOOST and Housing Readiness Assessment programs offered through [Empower Rural Iowa](#). Consider applying for a planning grant to update or create a new Comprehensive Plan.
- The [Iowa Living Roadways](#) program is a great program to help communities enhance their gateways and community assets, especially along major roadways. Continue to learn more about this program and consider applying for the program soon.
- The [Iowa Rural Development Council](#) is another organization working to assist rural communities in Iowa. They provide a weekly email blast that provides information on grant programs, educational opportunities, and a chance to network with other small communities across the state. Sign up for the weekly email by contacting Bill Menner, the Executive Director at director@iowardc.org.
- Look into the [Certified Local Government Program](#) to support Sheldon's preservation needs. Active participation in this program makes your community eligible for funding, training, technical assistance and provides access to a supportive network of other preservation-minded communities.

IN SUMMARY

In addition to the recommendations we have made, we also encourage the community to repeat the exercise we did on this Walk Around visit. Take walks downtown. Involve groups such as students, city council members, community residents, etc. Look for red flags and opportunities.

Also, it may be time to develop some action groups with a focus on downtown. Perhaps start with small committees that address buildings, signage, or streetscape.

And, finally, look into the [Main Street Iowa Program](#). Attend an application workshop and decide if it could be a good fit. Stay connected. Check out the Street Grid Resources, a living file library for downtown organizations to streamline organizational efficiency, springboard planning efforts, and empower advocacy. Examples of promotional activities, fundraising, market analysis, downtown housing, public spaces, etc. are located at iowaeda.com/downtown-resource-center/networking/

We thank Sheldon for inviting us to your downtown. The pride residents have in this community is evident. We hope our recommendations can help the community develop plans for even more successful projects. We encourage you to get together to define your priorities and assign organizations to begin addressing them. Remember, great moves are made with small steps!

CONTACTS AND RESOURCES

Iowa Downtown Resource Center.....515.348.6180 <https://opportunityiowa.gov/community/downtown-resource-center>
 Downtown Revitalization Fund.....515.348.6200..... community-infrastructure/cdbg-programs/downtown-revitalization-fund
 State Historic Preservation Office..... <https://opportunityiowa.gov/community/historic-preservation>